

“A Noble Train of Artillery” Henry Knox and the Journey to Dorchester Heights

The fall of 1775 found the American Army under General Washington in a dire situation. Their prior attempts to attack the British in Canada had ended in defeat and the British remained firmly in control of Boston, where they had been since their victory in the Battle of Bunker Hill.

In July of 1775, Washington arrives in Boston, taking command of the standing army there. While inspecting the troops he meets Henry Knox, a young former Boston bookseller, and is impressed with the man's vast knowledge of military strategy, fortifications, and artillery. Washington knew that he could easily occupy Dorchester Heights overlooking Boston, and gain a significant tactical advantage, but his army lacks the artillery needed to dislodge the British from the city.

Meanwhile, far to the northwest on Lake Champlain, the fort at Ticonderoga, under American control and in no immediate threat from the British was full of the very pieces of artillery Washington needed.

In a decisive stroke, as winter set in, Washington agrees to Knox's bold plan and promptly promotes him and dispatches him to organize the transport of fifty-nine of these captured artillery pieces safely back to Dorchester heights, where, he hoped, they would turn the tide against the British in the city below.

Knox, a smart man who up to this point spent most of the time with his books rather than in command, arrived at Fort Ticonderoga on the evening of December 5, 1775. Early the next day, assisted by the garrison, he began the laborious transport of the fifty-nine cannons.

The journey which took 56 days to complete was long and arduous. The cannons were transported by almost every mode available at the time; flat bottom scows, river gondolas, ox pulled carts, and sleds. The winter weather was brutal and the men got sick on the long march and in the poor conditions. In Knox's diary he writes about the men, "I know them to be very exceedingly weary." And he writes about himself, "I had almost perished in the cold." Knox and his men were at the mercy of the weather which was both his friend and his foe. In a letter to General Washington Knox describes his situation, "Snow detained us some days and now a cruel thaw hinders us from crossing the Hudson River." On Jan 24th 1776 the Noble train of artillery finally arrives back at Washington's camp at Cambridge.

On the second week of March, 1776, four months before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Washington stood in position to bombard the British in Boston from Dorchester Heights, using the array of heavy guns General Knox had laboriously dragged from Lake Champlain. When later asked about Knox's

expedition Lord William Howe, general of the British army standing in Boston at the time, stated, "The rebels have done more in one night than my whole army would have done in a month." After minimal cannon fire from the Colonial Army Howe recognized that only the evacuation of his army could save it, and on March 18th the victorious American army marched into the deserted city.

Lack of weapons and gunpowder was a huge problem plaguing the rebellion in the early parts of the war. When gunpowder supplies were very low, it was even known that Washington was forced to issue spears to his soldiers in case of British attacks; the rebellion was now allowed access to the armory in Boston which was one of the larger in the nation at the time. It also cut off the British supply line which was being run through Boston harbor. What was heroic in this expedition was that it was a stroke of inspiration, coupled with good timing, skilled logistics and luck. And by this stroke, the British Army was forced to relinquish its hold on one of the great American cities after two years of holding it under siege. In a time when proofs of potential victory were precious few, this single event did more than most to energize and inspire the Revolution. Henry Knox himself blew a breath of life into the American cause in a time where it seemed as if it would never come.